Contrastive Analysis through Collaborative Projects: A Study on Bahasa Melayu and English Language

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how collaborative small-group projects can facilitate tertiary-level language learners in the learning of contrastive analysis between Bahasa Melayu and English at a higher learning institution in Malaysia. Contrastive analysis, which involves comparing linguistic elements of two languages, can enhance learners' understanding and acquisition of both languages by highlighting structural differences and similarities. This research involves students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a Malaysian public university, majoring in English for Intercultural Communication. As part of the alternative assessments of this course, students are engaged in structured, semester-long group projects. These projects require learners to analyse and present linguistic features such as phonology, syntax, and lexicon of both languages, using them actively in varied communicative contexts. The study aims to explore the learners' attitudes towards each language through surveys and interviews. Additionally, this research examines which collaborative dynamics most effectively contribute to understanding and applying contrastive linguistic analysis. The present study offers detailed insights into how collaborative learning can be optimized in language education and recommendations for integrating effective group-based contrastive analysis projects into language curricula, potentially offering an effective approach to bilingual education.

Keywords: contrastive analysis, bilingual education, collaborative group projects, intercultural communication

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of education in the Malaysian context presents various opportunities and challenges, mainly because of its multilingual society. With Bahasa Melayu as the national language and English as an important second language, proficiency in both languages is essential to ensure effective communication and professional success. The Malaysian government's commitment to fostering bilingual proficiency is evident in its educational policies and curriculum design (Rahman et al., 2024). Given this context, there is a pressing need to employ effective pedagogical strategies to enhance bilingual education outcomes. However, mastering two distinct linguistic systems can be daunting for learners, which in turn calls for innovative instructional approaches to be used in language classrooms.

Contrastive analysis plays a crucial role in language learning by systematically comparing the linguistic items of two languages. It offers the opportunity to enhance bilingual proficiency. By highlighting the structural differences and similarities between languages, this approach aids learners in understanding each language. At the same time, the learners will be able to transfer skills between languages, thus improving their linguistic awareness. Hence, incorporating contrastive analysis can provide students with deeper insights into the linguistic intricacies of both Bahasa Melayu and the English language, but traditional instructional methods may not fully leverage the potential of this approach.

Collaborative learning, particularly through structured small-group projects, has gained recognition for its effectiveness in promoting active engagement, critical thinking and deeper understanding among learners (Vasodavan et al., 2021). According to McKay and Sridharan (2023), collaborative group work is considered indispensable in the higher education context, because it has been shown to develop a range of soft skills including communication, empathy, teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership and self-management, all of which

are skills highly sought after by employers and other stakeholders.

The present study focuses on a specific language course, namely 'Contrastive Analysis', in which students compare Bahasa Melayu and the English language. Contrastive Analysis is a mandatory course offered to second-year students at a public university in Malaysia, majoring in English for Intercultural Communication as part of their bachelor's degree program. Through a combination of project assessments, a questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews, this study seeks to offer detailed insights into how collaborative learning can be optimized in the teaching and learning of contrastive analysis, guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards learning contrastive analysis through collaborative projects?

2. Which collaborative dynamics most effectively contribute to understanding and applying contrastive analysis?

By addressing these questions, the present study sheds light on the potential benefits of collaborative projects in the Malaysian higher education context, particularly in the learning of contrastive analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contrastive Analysis Theory

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is a linguistic approach which has been considered a fundamental component in the field of language learning and acquisition. This approach examines the differences and similarities between two or more languages, and it is particularly significant in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Al-khresheh, 2016). Contrastive analysis entails identifying and describing structural features of the languages being compared, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary.

CA has been applied to teach languages using findings which inform curriculum design and instructional strategies, especially in the mid-20th century, when behaviourism dominated language learning methodologies (Lennon, 2008). CA can be broken down into five steps to make a systematic comparison and contrast of any two languages. The steps are selection, description, comparison, prediction, and verification. The first step involves selecting the two languages and identifying the texts to be analysed. Since it is impossible to compare everything, in this step, there is a need to decide on the linguistic category to be analysed. Next, in the description stage, the two languages need to be characterized in accordance with the selected linguistic category. The comparison stage then compares the similarities and differences between the two languages, be it in terms of form or meaning. Fourthly, the prediction stage requires the researcher to predict whether the similarities and differences are problematic for language learners. Finally, the verification step requires the researcher to find out if the predictions are true or not.

In Malaysia, English is recognized as an international language and taught as a second language in schools. The importance of English proficiency has been emphasized in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013), which aims to promote bilingual proficiency in both Bahasa Melayu and English language. Upon completing school, Malaysian students should be able to work in both a Bahasa Melayu and English language environment. As a result, teaching and learning contrastive analysis at the tertiary level is important for the students enrolled in an English for Intercultural Communication program, especially because it allows them to have a better grasp of both languages through analysing them.

Collaborative Group Work in Language Learning

According to Stanley and Zhang (2020), collaborative group work is a powerful tool in education to enhance student engagement and learning. Sridharan et al. (2019) noted that within the higher education context, collaborative group work is considered crucial. This is especially when McKay and Sridharan (2023) emphasise that working collaboratively goes beyond academic contexts, since collaborative work culture and peer learning have been integral to diverse organisations in today's borderless working environment. Having been involved in

such activities, the students benefit from working with others in team environments, which is one of the most important skills in the workplace (Padhi, 2019).

Previous studies (e.g. McKay & Sridharan, 2023; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012) have highlighted the benefits of collaborative group works. In their study, McKay and Sridharan (2023) revealed that group work tasks were seen by students to 'develop key 'invaluable' skills, including practical teamwork skills that were viewed as beneficial for the 'real world of work', as well as 'researching' skills, and 'problem-solving' (p. 230). Moreover, it was said that engaging in collaborative activities promotes the development of critical thinking skills (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). In collaborative group work, the students are encouraged to analyse, evaluate and synthesise information collectively. In the context of the present study, such skills are necessary to support their analysis of language structures, considering that they must make critical evaluations to the texts they are comparing and contrasting.

In higher education contexts, research indicates that learning collaboratively improves academic performance compared to individual study (Andrews & Rapp, 2015). Along the same lines, Baharun et al. (2016) mentioned that task-based language learning, which involves engaging learners in meaningful communicative tasks, can be effective in promoting language learning. This can be achieved through their engagement in authentic communication while simultaneously helping to develop their language skills. Collaborative environments also provide emotional support and motivation among peers, which can enhance learning experience. Amini et al. (2022) noted that students often feel more accountable for their learning as they encourage each other to contribute effectively.

However, collaborative group work is not without criticisms. McKay and Sridharan (2023) shared that the students in their study indicated that the 'uneven distribution of workload amongst team members negatively affected their overall experience of working in small groups' (p. 226). Other studies such as Le et al. (2016) have also mentioned that a common challenge in collaborative learning is the issue of unequal participation among team members, in which some students may dominate discussions, while others contribute less. This situation would cause frustration and will end up reducing the less active members' participation in the activities.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the benefits of collaborative learning outweigh the disadvantages when there is careful and purposeful planning of the activities. The students' attributes, course content, as well as the learning environment are among the factors that may contribute to a positive learning environment regardless of the approach employed (Sridharan et al., 2019). Hence, the present study explores the use of collaborative projects in contrastive analysis classrooms as an innovative learning approach to aid the analysis of Bahasa Melayu and English language texts.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches through a case study. Although a case study has small sample size and presents limitations in terms of its generalizability, it guides research, facilitates data collection, provides the opportunity for analysing pertinent data and information (Tayyara, 2020). Additionally, this form of inquiry allows researchers to generate further discussions on the subject, particularly in the context of teaching Bahasa Melayu and English language in Malaysia via collaborative projects.

A. Participants

The students enrolled in the Contrastive Analysis class activities were fourth-semester English for Intercultural Communication students at a Malaysian public university. Throughout the semester, the students were exposed to the methods for analysing languages, particularly Bahasa Melayu and English using contrastive analysing. The analyses were conducted on various levels, such as morphology, syntax, and semantics of both languages. The students in these classes meet twice a week for two hours each session for 14 weeks. They were assigned two collaborative projects, one of which required them to work in pairs, and the other in small groups of 3 to 4 students. In the present study, a total of 39 students and two instructors worked together in the teaching and learning of the course.

B. About the Collaborative Projects

Prior to conducting the collaborative projects, the instructors took some preparatory measures. The selection of materials was decided by the instructors. For Project 1 (pair work), the students were asked to use children's storybooks with similar titles in both Bahasa Melayu and English language. Specific criteria were also set in terms of the length of the texts, as well as the similarities in the storylines of the two books. For Project 2 (group work), the students were instructed to choose two blogs of a similar theme in Bahasa Melayu and English. These blogs were approved by the instructors first before the students proceeded with the analysis. This is important to ensure that the requirements of the assignments can be fulfilled. Once these aspects were made clear to the students, the task sheets with specific instructions were shared with them. The students have about one month (4 weeks) to complete each project from the time the task sheets were assigned. This gave them ample time to work on the two projects. Consultation sessions were offered to the students throughout the semester, and the instructors observed and assessed the projects as they progressed

The students presented their collaborative projects in the form of an e-poster and presentation (Project 1) and a written report and presentation (Project 2). The outputs of the collaborative projects presented the contrastive analysis of Bahasa Melayu and English at the morphology, syntax, and semantic levels.

C. Research Instruments

To explore the potential benefits of collaborative projects in the teaching and learning of contrastive analysis, the following research instruments were employed: project assessment, a questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

Project Assessment:

The project assessment involved two collaborative projects designed to gauge the students' understanding and practical application of contrastive analysis. Each project required students to analyse selected texts, specifically children's storybooks and blog entries, to identify linguistic features of Bahasa Melayu and English. The students were expected to demonstrate their ability to discern the language structures of the languages compared.

The students' skills in articulating their findings both in written reports and oral presentations were assessed based on the depth of understanding demonstrated, the quality of insights produced, and the level of engagement shown throughout the projects.

Questionnaire:

The questionnaire was used to elicit the students' perceptions of the collaborative projects in learning contrastive analysis. The questionnaire includes 8 items, including items related to their overall experience, project management, and understanding of the specific linguistic aspects of the respective languages compared. The students were asked to rate their 8 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 5= Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester.

Semi-structured Interviews:

The semi-structured interviews were implemented to obtain in-depth information about the students' perceptions of the collaborative dynamics that contribute to understanding and applying contrastive analysis. Two questions were asked to 5 students who agreed to be interviewed after they completed the questionnaire.

D. Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire was completed online via Google Forms at the end of the semester, after the projects were concluded and evaluated. This was done to explore the students' perceptions of the collaborative projects and the collaborative dynamics that contributed to the understanding of contrastive analysis. Following that, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

E. Data Analysis Procedures

The quantitative data were analysed and presented as means and standard deviations to illustrate the students' perceptions of the collaborative projects in the contrastive analysis classroom. The transcripts were investigated closely and read through several times to identify the emerging themes, by assigning different codes.

FINDINGS

A. Analysis of Project Outcomes and Observations

In Project 1, the students performed a contrastive analysis of Bahasa Melayu and English language children's story books with similar titles. They were assigned to work in pairs to produce an e-poster (see Fig.1) and present their findings orally.

Fig.1 Sample of the e-poster for Project 1

The analyses of the texts revealed that the students were able to identify the linguistic features such as morphology, syntax, and semantics. Following the procedures for conducting contrastive analysis, the students presented the 'prediction' and 'verification' steps, in which they evaluated whether the similarities and differences had caused difficulties in learning the linguistic feature analysed. Additionally, they suggested possible ways to assist second language learners to learn the linguistic items. The e-poster served as a visual aid

when the students gave an oral presentation of their findings.

Example 1: Tenses

Malay Text	English Text		
Dalam masa seminggu, Taro **telah membunuh** lebih daripada sepuluh ekor haiwan.	By the end of the week, Taro **had killed** more than ten animals.	In Malay, there is no usage of -ed. Past tenses are portrayed easily using "telah", while English (L2) has a variety of tense rules.	**Evaluation** • Complexity of acquiring L2 grammar. • Technical aspect of collective nouns is not necessarily introduced in L2.

Example 2: Collective Nouns

Malay Text	English Text		
Sam juga memperkenalkan Don kepada kawan-kawannya iaitu **sekumpulan tupai terbang.**	Sam also introduced Don to his **flying squirrel friends.**	Plurality is used instead of "scurry" due to the audience level of the book. In Malay, collective nouns are easier to comprehend.	**Ways to assist L2 learning** **Systematic learning** • Link prior knowledge with new knowledge. • Embed reading discussions to familiarise with different structures. • Prioritise basic linguistic elements first.

Example 3: Adjective Placement

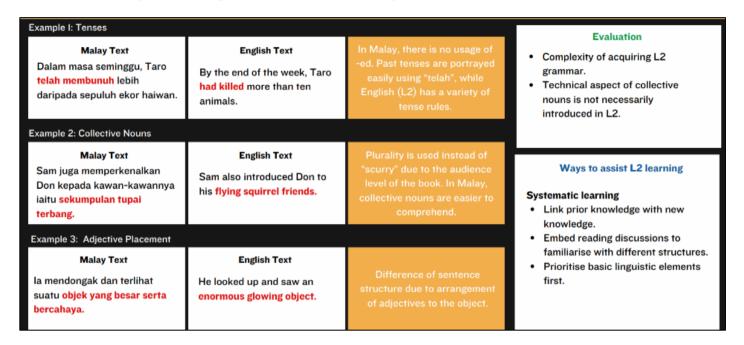| Malay Text	English Text		
Ia mendongak dan terlihat suatu **objek yang besar serta bercahaya.**	He looked up and saw an **enormous glowing object.**	Difference of sentence structure due to arrangement of adjectives to the object.	

Fig.2 Explanation on the prediction and verification based on the examples in the story books

For Project 2, the students worked on the analysis of two blogs of a similar theme, one written in Bahasa Melayu, and the other in English. The students presented their findings orally in class and submitted a written report of about 3000 words. With the different blogs they analysed, the findings were found to be almost similar in terms of language structures of the blogs, the choice of vocabulary, special expressions, and the use of visuals.

More specifically, some examples of the language structure include the use of rhetorical questions, code-switching or code-mixing, the use of hedges and boosters. Another category, which is choice of vocabulary, includes examples such as borrowed words and the use of fillers. For the special expressions, the students found similarities and differences in how the two bloggers used cultural expressions to engage with the readers. Finally, they also examined the use of visuals in the two blogs and provided specific examples such as the use of pictures, different font types, as well as captions.

b. Rhetorical Questions

English	Bahasa Melayu
"Have you ever had a moment where you just realized you had been blind to something?"	"Mesti tertanya-tanya dimana pengantin perempuan?"

Table 3

Rhetorical questions are used to engage the reader and provoke thought. Based on the table above, both of the blogs use rhetorical questions in order to engage the audience by prompting them to reflect on their own experiences, creating a sense of connection and empathy. Contrastively, the English blog uses a rhetorical question to prompt the audience to reflect on a personal experience. This invites introspection and shared understanding, making the reader feel connected to the speaker's perspective. However, the Malay blog appeals through shared curiosity or concern among the audience, thus engaging them through common sentiment.

Fig.3 Screenshot of the students' work for Project 2

4.3.4 Visuals Used

a. Pictures

English Blog	Bahasa Melayu Blog

Table 8

Generally, these two blogs feature the unique wedding customs of the culture. However, when compared, it is prominent that the English blog has ample pictures of the blogger, Britteny, herself experiencing the unique tradition of Indian wedding. The Malay blog on the other hand, often has candid shots of the blogger's family and friends. This reflects the collectivistic and individualistic culture where the English blog practises an individualistic culture. This can be seen from the picture above where most of the pictures are about the author instead of the bride while the Malay blog on the other hand, highlights the event as whole by including their relatives and friends in the pictures which shows their collectivistic culture. According to Tiwari (2023), use of visuals and pictures enhances the ability of ESL learners to capture the language. By using images, ESL learners can comprehend the whole scenario while also improving their

Fig.4 Screenshot of the students' explanation on the use of visuals in the blogs analysed

Overall, the two collaborative projects were successfully completed by the students. They utilized two different texts and conducted contrastive analysis on each of them, focusing on specific linguistic features.

B. Learners' Attitudes Towards Learning Contrastive Analysis Contrastive Analysis Through Group Project

This section presents the results of the survey related to the students' attitudes towards learning contrastive analysis through group projects. Only 22 out of the 39 students responded to the survey. Following that, five students were interviewed. The quantitative findings are presented in Table 1 below:

Table I Students Attitudes Towards Learning Contrastive Analysis Through Group Projects

		M	SD
1	I had an overall positive experience with the group project on contrastive analysis.	3.8636	.5125
2	I often meet with my group members to work on the project.	3.5455	.67098
3	The group meetings effectively facilitated my understanding of contrastive analysis.	3.7273	.45584
4	The project improved my understanding of phonological differences between Bahasa Melayu and the English language.	3.7727	.42893
5	The project helped me better understand the syntactic structures of both languages.	3.7727	.42893
6.	The project helped me better understand the semantics features of both languages.	3.8182	.39477
7	The project made me feel more confident in using both languages in communicative contexts.	3.5909	.73414
8	The project positively changed my attitude towards learning Bahasa Melayu and English	3.5455	.50965

As seen in Table 1, the students agreed with most of the statements, with the mean scores ranging from 3.55 (SD = .67) to 3.86 (SD = .52). Generally, the students agreed that they had positive experiences with the group

projects in the course (M = 3.86; SD = .51). In terms of project management, the groups were found to meet often to discuss the projects further (M = 3.54; SD = .67). The meetings to coordinate the group projects were found to facilitate the students' understanding of contrastive analysis (M = 3.73; SD = .46). Additionally, the students indicated that the project improved their understanding of contrastive analysis at various linguistic levels, specifically phonology (M = 3.77; SD = .42), syntactic structures (M = 3.77; SD = .42), and semantic features (M = 3.82; SD = .39). The students also agreed that the collaborative group projects increased their confidence in using Bahasa Melayu and English in communicative contexts (M = 3.59; SD = .73) and positively changed their attitudes towards learning the languages (M = 3.54; SD = .51).

C. Collaborative Dynamics: Factors Contributing to Successful Learning of Contrastive Analysis

The qualitative data analysis revealed the collaborative dynamics which contribute to the successful learning of contrastive analysis throughout the course. The factors are clear division of tasks, equal participation, effective communicative methods, and feedback mechanisms.

Clear Division of Tasks

A clear division of tasks is crucial in collaborative projects. The students shared that each group member can contribute to the completion of the projects based on their strengths and abilities. They also emphasised the importance of clear division of tasks as it promotes a balanced exchange of ideas, while at the same time ensuring that each member's voice is heard. In the interviews, the students shared how this was done. Student 4 mentioned that "the tasks were divided based on what each of us was good at", which in turn, "made the workload manageable and we completed our parts faster". When asked to elaborate on this, the student mentioned that each team member took part in the analysis of the texts, but there are other aspects related to the projects such as the formatting of the project write up, and the poster design and layout would require someone whose strength is in these related aspects. Another student mentioned this: "I felt more confident when I knew exactly what my part was in the project. It helped me focus on specific areas and do a better job" (Student 3). This means that the students were able to concentrate on the tasks assigned, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and ownership of the project.

Effective Communication Methods

Another factor highlighted by the students is effective communication methods in the collaborative projects. More specifically, the students mentioned the role of online collaboration tools to facilitate smooth coordination. Among the tools used by the students is Google Docs, which was noted as "making it easier to work on the project together, even when we couldn't meet in person." (Student 1). Using Google Docs also helped to ensure that all team members were on the same page as they continued working collaboratively. They made full use of the 'comment' function on Google Docs to stay updated on each other's progress and address issues in a timely manner. The 'comments' can be assigned to a specific team member by tagging their email address, and notifications will be sent to their email addresses. Student 5 also mentioned that "while face-to-face meetings were better for brainstorming, online tools were more efficient for editing and tracking progress". The platform also offers opportunities for open discussion and exchange of ideas and feedback in a supportive environment. At the same time, all team members are informed about the project's progress, and they continue working together effectively.

Feedback Mechanism

It was also noted that the lecturer's feedback during consultation sessions helped to ensure the successful completion of the collaborative projects, since "the feedback from the lecturer was helpful as it pointed out what we needed to improve, which made our project much better." (Student 2). The feedback allows the students to identify areas for improvement and help them refine the quality of the projects. During the consultation sessions, the students were asked to present their preliminary findings, and the lecturers commented on the students' progress. At the same time, the students are encouraged to share the challenges they faced, particularly when analyzing the texts. This intervention is important since Student 3 mentioned that "the feedback kept us on track and reassured us that we were going in the right direction."

DISCUSSION

Students' Perceptions of Learning Contrastive Analysis through Collaborative Projects

The findings of the present study suggest that collaborative projects can serve as an effective platform for the teaching and learning of contrastive analysis of Bahasa Melayu and English. Through working together on projects, the students demonstrated an overall positive attitude towards learning Contrastive Analysis. This finding was found to be consistent with Baharun et al. (2016) who noted that engaging learners in meaningful communicative tasks can be effective in promoting language learning. Moreover, through the collaborative projects, the students were able to engage in effective communication as they negotiated with different perspectives to ensure successful project completion. Koşar (2021) mentioned that in collaborative environments, students can "see an issue from a larger perspective and will examine more suggestions and answers more than one person can" (p.219).

Additionally, the collaborative projects enhanced the students' understanding of key linguistic aspects of both languages. Previous research (e.g. Andrews & Repp, 2015) has shown that learning collaboratively can improve academic performance more effectively than individual study. Collaborative environments allow students to engage actively with the text they are analyzing, which in turn reinforces their comprehension and retention. Working in teams also allows students to begin with individual analysis and then discuss their findings with the other group members. This results in a richer analysis of language patterns, grammatical structures, and cultural aspects unique to each language.

Furthermore, collaborative activities encourage critical thinking skills, which is a key component in linguistic analysis and comparison. Koşar (2021) emphasizes that collaborative settings enable students to develop critical thinking skills by requiring them to make analytical evaluations. In the present study, the students learned to critically examine the choice of vocabulary, syntax, and idiomatic expressions used in the texts they are analyzing. This tests their ability to identify the similarities and differences that might otherwise go unnoticed if they were to analyse the texts individually.

Key Considerations When Conducting Collaborative Projects in Language Classrooms

To successfully incorporate collaborative projects in contrastive analysis classrooms, it is important to ensure a clear division of tasks. According to McKay and Sridharan (2023), uneven distribution of workload amongst team members could negatively impact students' overall experiences of working in groups. As recommended by Koşar (2021), collaborative environments should encourage students to work together to reach an agreement. This will encourage them to be accountable for the tasks assigned to them, as they take responsibility for their tasks which contribute to the overall goal of the team. When the tasks are divided clearly, this will ensure equal participation from all group members. The disadvantages of unequal participation were highlighted by Le et al. (2017), who noted that some students may tend to dominate discussions, while others contribute less. Hence, a clear division of tasks is seen as crucial to ensure equal participation in collaborative environments.

Moreover, effective communication is another important aspect to be considered in collaborative projects. The present study highlighted the role of online collaborative tools such as Google Docs, which assisted the students when preparing for the projects. Tools like these allow students to provide real-time contributions and provide feedback, which in turn promotes an interactive environment. Alenezi et al. (2023) mentioned that integrating multiple communication methods can enhance collaborative experience by providing various platforms for engagement. Various other digital tools can be utilized for collaborative environments, which can be employed following the nature of the language courses. For example, Robillos (2023) highlighted the helpful affordances of FlipGrid to enhance students' speaking achievement and communication engagement. Depending on the skills to be focused on, various digital tools can be utilized by the students to engage fully in the collaborative learning process.

Finally, feedback mechanism is also crucial in ensuring the successful execution of collaborative projects. According to Morrison and Jacobsen (2023), timely and constructive feedback from instructors helps students promote learning and self-regulation. Lecturers who engage with students in small groups can foster a more

supportive environment (Sigdi, 2022). As the lecturers speak with the students in small groups, they can facilitate collaboration and encourage closeness among the students. A well-structured feedback mechanism promotes a cycle of continuous improvement, enabling students to enhance the quality of their work since they are expected to tackle the problems more effectively.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study demonstrated the potential of collaborative projects in contrastive analysis classrooms, particularly in the context of Bahasa Melayu and the English language. The findings of the present study only involved a small number of participants. Nevertheless, the advantages and challenges of employing collaborative projects in language learning classrooms were discussed in detail. The incorporation of this approach into the teaching and learning of contrastive analysis has assisted in promoting the students' understanding of the subject matter, as well as enhancing their teamwork skills. It is hoped that future studies can investigate the application of collaborative projects in language classrooms by focusing on other languages. Future studies can also explore the perspectives of language practitioners and the industry to identify other areas of language learning in which collaborative projects can be included.

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